Easter 1965

HE IS NOT HERE: HE HAS RISEN

This is the fifth Easter I have stood in your pulpit--and for the fifth consecutive time I have found my Easter Sermon the most difficult sermon to prepare in the entire church year. That may seem strange to you--but I think it is a fairly common concern of ministers everywhere. Our problem with Easter ~~begins~~ initiates when our faith begins the torturous task of maturation. At that point, and I'm certain most of you have been there and back many times, we are not overly receptive to anything in our religion that we cannot comprehend. We find ourselves wanting to lodge our faith in persons and events that fit into the neat categories of the mind. We have no difficulty believing in a Jesus who was a great teacher of morality, our Lord is the Christ of the Sermon on the Mt., our Christian Faith, a practical applying of the Golden Rule. This point in my own experience is most vivid to me. How I, and my fellow students, wished that the Gospels had stopped with the crucifixion. This we could comprehend--a good man, unjustly executed for a good cause--a cause that we were happy to proclaim, and to which we were ready to give our lives. That Jesus Christ rose from the grave simply seemed unnecessary and certainly very confusing. But in moments of candor, however, we were deeply distrubed by the words that simply would not go away-("this Jesus, whom men have hanged on a tree; God has raised him from the dead and made him both Lord and Christ.") Try as we might to ignore it, this theme kept rushing into our consciousness, and slowly, ever so slowly, we saw the truth that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is not just the fosting on the cake, not just the "they-lived-happily-ever-after" ending to the story--but the central and cohesive event in the whole drama. We began to see that

the N.T. is not presenting a noble life--or an ethical teacher--we realized that the disciples were not enthusiastic about selling the Sermon on the Mt.; we came to the difficult realization that Jesus is the Christ--precisely because God raised him from the dead--and finally that the whole history of the Church has been firmly rooted in the conviction expressed in the Gospels: ("He is not here; he has risen.")

The resurrection of Christ then becomes the central facet of our own faith; this is why we worship God--this is why we worship on Sunday--: the first day of the week; this is the source of hope in our lives--the source of meaning and comfort and a reason for being. This event--this mysterious, incomprehensible event because for us the central fact of human history, all history, before and after.

And when Simon Peter and we [illegible] of this in the [illegible] with [illegible] the glory [illegible] which raised [illegible] the truth that we [illegible] the [illegible] event of human history. [illegible] like [illegible] with your wife [illegible] and [illegible] love her. We don't do this, because that love exists all the time--it's unnecessary to set aside a time to explain it: rather because it explains itself in a hundred different ways every day of the year. So it is with the Resurrection. We are here to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ--on this day--at this time. but this

event is really celebrated every time we gather for worship; it is the event that ties the loose ends of my life together; it lies behind every sermon I preach; it rests beneath your existence in sickness and health--in life and death. And on this day we are called on to say somsething joyfully meaningful in 20 min. or less.

This morning, I want to discuss the Resurrection by asking; what is our deepest personal need?" - What is it that you and I personally need to become fully satisfied, content human beings?" Quickly, many of us might respond that we need a higher standard of living; that there's nothing wrong with us that another digit in our income wouldn't correct. We feel this way, you and I do, and at the same time we know it is untrue. We know those who have little, by way of income and luxury and yet seem to have more stability than we. We know those who have more money, bigger cars, more liesure time, and who are absolutely miserable. And, if we're perceptive, we'll realize some guilt that our culture has held up to us the way to the good life paved with dollar bills.

We might say that what we really need is good health; or youth again, or a change in scenery--but in saying this we know that our need goes far deeper. I said Wednesday night that humanity, in a general sense needs unity more than anything else. Ths morning I want to suggest that your greatest personal need, and mine, is a sense that we belong here, that we're needed and wanted and loved; that there's a real reason for our being; that our life has some direction and purpose.

This sense is even harder to come by than the extra digit on our paycheck, or the change of local--or any of the petty problems we inflate way out ofproportion.

Skeptics tell us there is no meaning, no direction, nossense of belonging here. They tell us that life is a cynical farce, that we are wasting our time searching for something which will tie it all together and give it meaning; and that the best we can do is get what we can, take care of number one and, at a very shallow depth, enjoy life, every golden drop bf it.

You and I are not skeptical to that degree, but we are all caught up in the muddy back wash of a culture and way of life that is. We are all part of culture that has glorified materialism in a carefully delleiated success pattern; we are victims of a genteel cynicism that says there is no tomorrow--there is nothing else--there is nothing more to life than that which you can touch and feel and buy and consume.

There is nothing more--just the immediate tangibilities of life; and within this context the going gets pretty rough. We're all human; we have our ups and downs; the immdiate, the now, can be pretty miserable. Life frequently lets us down. We look candidly at the now, the immediate--and there's not much to grasp and embrace; a world situation that is anything but encouraging, a nation filled with strife and sectionalism; perhaps a job we cannot stand, or lonliness tht is driving us to despair; or family problems tht refuse to respond to our enlightened mamipulation. And though it all there runs the haunting question "Is it all worthwhile? Does it really make any sense? or not? Is there nothing more for me than this? ∴ difference if I live

Winter wanes, one morning the depressing borwn blades of grass suddently are green. So, it has been the testimoney of millions upon millions of men that suddenly there comes flooding into life, a

newness--a sense of God's grace and love that picks up all the pieces and fits them together; a sense of being needed--a feeling of being at home--a knowledge that there is a reason for our being. And to what source have these millios of Christians pointed? From where does this saving, healing, renewing, feeling come? Unanimously--down across 20 centuries of time, from Saul of Tarsus to the man of today, they cry in one voice--from an empty tomb! - From a rock hewn hole in the ground that for three days cradled the lifeless form of Jesus Christ - From a tomb burst open, all this--because Christ is risen.

In this event men have known that the Good in the world is more powerful than the evil. Evil crucified the Son of God--an evil conspiracy of religious arrogance, political opportunism, human fickleness and blindness. But the tomb, in its silent, early morning emptiness, is eloquent testimony that Good is supreme,-that Almighty God reigns supreme--even over the forces of evil. Now that may sound very flowery and theological to you, so let's put it another way. We live in a threatening world--we look across the Ocean to Viet Nam and China, and we shudder. We look into the heart of our own culture, to the rotten, deteriorating center of our cities and we fear for civilization. When we open our eyes and survey all that is around us, we cannot help but see the demonic power of evil. And perhaps it becomes too much and we cry, wistfully, despairingly, ("My God My God, why hast thou forsaken us?") But into our despair into our own experieing of tragible evil comes the message of Resurrection. Good is supreme, God is still in control; confidently, mythically, down tumbugn the ages comes the message-("do not be afraid--he is risen.")

In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ men have known also that life wins the ultimate confrontation with death. Behind many of our fears and anxieties lies and unspoken dread of death. Sigmund Freud pointed out that part of living is fearing death--some obsessively, some unconsciously--but all men--not wanting to die, wandering what it's like, dreading to die. This is not unfamiliar to us. Every-one of us here has thought about death--our own death; we've mourned the death of relatives and friends; we've cursed God and life that it ends all so vainly and brutally. And into the gloom of our despair there comes a bright ray of hope;-a ray that began in a tomb that did not end the exiteance of Jeuss Christ. Because he died--and did not remain in his grave, we can accept death-- our death, the untimely deaths of our friends and loved ones, as a part of life--like birth. Because God raised up Jesus Christ we can face death confidently in the knowledge that God's love does not cease when our years come to an end; because God raised him up we can rejoice with Paul: ("O death where is thy sting--O Grave where is thy Victory.") Because God, in the historical event of the Resurrection, forever defeated even death we can rejoice at the words of John Greenleaf Whittier:

> Alas for hm who never sees
> The Stars shine through his cyprus trees!
> Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,
> Nor looks to see the breaking day
> Across the mournful marbles play!
> Who hath not learned, in hours of faith
> The truth to flesh and sense unknown
> That life is every Lord of Death,
> And Love can never lose its own."

Because of the Resurrection men have felt and experienced the knowledge that God cares--that we are at home in the world; that it is our world

made safe for us by his love. Is there a reason for your being? The testimony of Easter is that God loves us with an everlasting love--not only now--but through death--through all life's experiences. He loves us enough to die for us; he loves us enough to reveal himself in the act of Resurrection. This is our reason for being; God cares whether or not we live; God gives us the answer to our deepest need in the Resurrection of Jesus Chirst. John R. Fry summed it up beautifully in an article that appeared in Preby. Life; "If truly spoken and ardently believed, the Easter message of the Church is a message tht points to real comfort, of precisely the sort enjoyed by anyone who has ever been in a warm house on a bitterly cold night. Easter signals that the entire universe has been made into a safe place."

By way of introduction I attempted to explain a minister's concern at not saying enough on this day. I've not said much, really--I've only scratched the surface of several germinal ideas, and Ive done so assuming you're belief in the Resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ. In our concluding minutes togethr let us look squarely, at the claims the church has made. Let's be frank with each other and turn the cold stare of logic on the traditional Easter message.

The characters are easy to identify; Jerusalem of the first century - we can accurately restructure that; the Passover celebrattion--we know almost exactly how many people were there and what they were doing. History books fill in the details of Roman Provincial Govt; we know more about Pilate than did 90% of the people he ruled. We know that several days prior to the passover an itenerate Jewish prophet named Jesus and several f his disciples entered the city and caused a minor stir. We know that he quickly alienated the religioous and poltical leaders and was executed in the customary manner as a political subversive. We know he died--the Romans were immaculately efficent.

There is not a secular historian who will not grant this much. This much is for the record.

Now let's look at what happened. This Jesus had been a collossal failure. He had dsiappointed his disciples to aman; their convictions and loyalty to him were so shallow that they fled at the first sign of trouble. Men die for great causes, men, willingly and heroically lay down there lives for their country, or for their family--or for a friend--or today for Civil Rights. But so unconvinced were the disciples that they deserted him and let him die completely alone.

By every human measurement that ought to be the end of the story. A nice tale--a tragic ending, like Hamlet. But it didn't end there. Somewhere in Jerusalem, somewhere behind a carefully bolted door, the 11 who remained cowered, discuraged, ashamed--prhaps disgusted. And in their midst--in the midst of these 11 diverse, unlikely men, something happened. Something happened to drive them out of that room--with a vengeance--out into the indifferent, hostile streets of Jerusalem to tell the world the best news that had ever come to man. Theywould die for it: they would leave everything behind because of what happened; they would travel by foot, donkey and ship to tell what happened to them. And as they told, others experienced it too, until the whole empire was consumed by it. From there it went on to every nation of the world--across 20 centuries of persecution, wars, apthy and still it goes on.

History has a way of weeding out its half truths. Feudalism passed into oblivion--so did the Divine Right of Kings--Nazism died, as will Communism. But nothing, nothing has negated this--nothing has stopped men from believing and telling and dying for it.

And it began back there--in the morning stillness of the first day of the week. Did it happen? Can we seriously ask that question? Men have experienced it; men have known it in their lives; the whole glorious history of Christendom fed on it and still is powered by it.

Let us not be ashamed to affirm the Resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ. Let us go from this place with the words fresh in our minds; let us take them into everyday of our lives. "He is not here--for he has risen!

Amen

O Almighty and Eternal God - we thank thee for the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Send thy spirit among us, our Father - that on this day - and every day we might hear the ancient news and Feel its power. Through Jesus Christ our Risen Lord. Amen.